WORKING PAPER

Encouraging cases:

Exploring the potential of critical realist case studies of "what could be" for a critically performative CMS

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Abstract

In CMS, debates on methodology have typically taken second stage to those on epistemology and ontology as the field embraced a plurality of methods. Recent work pushing for CMS to engage more strongly with mainstream theory, however, raises the need for a discussion on how to use methods recognizable to the mainstream in progressive ways. This paper seeks to remedy this lacunae by linking the concept of Critical Performativity (Spicer, Alvesson & Kärreman, 2009) to case study research and shows how case studies informed by Critical Realism (Easton, 2010a) can be generalized to "what could be" (Schofield, 2002). In this way, employing case studies in a progressive fashion may serve as a valuable means for a critically perfomative CMS to achieve greater impact through influence on mainstream theory building, business school education and management practice.

Introduction

The last fifteen years have seen the field of Critical Management Studies (CMS) grow to increasing importance as an alternative to mainstream research and teaching on management and organization (Adler, Forbes & Willmott, 2007; Alvesson, Bridgman & Willmott, 2009; Keleman & Rumens, 2008). Although the field of CMS is broad bordering on wildly eclectic and the coherence of it is questionable (Keleman & Rumens, 2008; Parker, 2002), it has been argued that "to engage in critical management studies means, at the most basic level, to say that there is something wrong with management, as a practice and as a body of knowledge, and *that it should be changed*" (Fournier & Grey, 2000, p. 16, italics added). As such, CMS offers business school academics a platform from which to conduct research, that challenges the naturalness of management, the lionization of managers, the domination of organizations and the reduction of workers to optimizable human resources. Through critically studying management it is possible to expose discrimination and emancipate workers as well as "generate better norms, policies, ideas and management values" (Akella, 2008, p. 100). In this paper, I argue that to achieve this goal, CMS should explore how mainstream methods might be employed to conduct critical research and demonstrate how case study methodology might serve this purpose.

Although increasingly institutionalized as a research field (Willmott, 2006), CMS has failed to impact broadly outside academia (Parker, 2002) and even has difficulties influencing the mainstream debates on management theory within it (Legge, 2001). The question thus beckons, if CMS is achieving very much or getting pre-occupied with 'arcane' and well-rehearsed arguments between post-Marxists realists and Foucauldian relativists over ontology and epistemology (Kelemen & Rumens, 2008; Parker, 2002; Spicer, Alvesson & Kärreman, 2009) in what has been called a 'less important side-show' (Parker, 2000) relative to the problems that CMS could be addressing. In order to move CMS in a more constructive direction, Spicer, Alvesson & Kärreman (2009) suggest the need for CMS to orient itself towards Critical Performativity in order to realize its political project. This, they argue, means to "actively and pragmatically intervene in specific debates about management and encourage progressive forms of management" (p. 537). As such, they echo the sentiment expressed by Parker (2002) that there is little point in complaining "if no one can hear your voice, or understand it even if they could hear you" (p. 14).

Critical Performativity aims for, essentially, taking a pragmatic approach to critique that might be more constructive or *generative* (Kelemen & Rumens, 2008) as opposed to the traditional purist approach to critique, that might be described as de-constructive or even destructive (Adler, Forbes & Willmott, 2008), so as to achieve greater impact on the mainstream. It attempts, in other words, to make CMS speak a language that might more powerfully persuade the mainstream to change. To this end, Spicer, Alvesson & Kärreman (2009) present a range of *tactics* that might enable this. However, their recommendations mirror an unfortunate tendency in CMS to disregard matters of *research methodology*: the CMS scholar intent on taking up a critically performative approach to management studies is left with very little in the way of practical guidance. While CMS has tended towards encouraging a plurality of methods (Jones, 2009; Keleman & Rumens, 2008; Reed, 2009) with some perspectives even being anti-methodological (Alvesson & Skjöldberg, 2009), Critical Performativity highlights the need for employing research methods that resonate

with the mainstream and allow a critical perspective the space to intervene in a given debate in order to influence *theory building*. The question thus becomes how methods recognizable to the mainstream might be pressed into the service of CMS so as to be both philosophically well-supported, critical and constructive.

This paper argues that case studies might provide one such means of engaging with mainstream theory building by taking up a Critical Realist philosophy of science and by aiming for a different form of generalization than what is typical of case studies. To this end, it draws on the works of Easton (2010a, 2010b) and Schofield (2002) conducted on case studies outside the field of CMS, but links them to a mainstream discussion on theory building and, from there, to the concept of Critical Performativity. As case studies become increasingly mainstream and, in some fields of business studies, the most used methodology (Easton, 2010a; Hammersley & Gomm, 2002), their value in theory building also becomes increasingly recognized (Eisenhardt, 1989; Gerring, 2004). Compared to earlier work on methodology in CMS (Alvesson & Skjöldberg, 2009), case studies are thus much more readily recognized by the mainstream and may thus serve as a vehicle for engaging. The contribution of the paper is thus to open up a discussion on concrete research methodologies and their relevance to CMS in general, and a critically performative CMS in particular, and to provide an illustration of how one concrete method might be adapted from mainstream usage.

In arguing for the relevance of a methodology based on case studies to CMS, this paper proceeds as follows. First, it outlines the debate on performativity within CMS, focusing on how the concept has been reconceptualised and how Critical Performativity offers a partial resolution of the debate based on a pragmatic, post-Marxist approach to CMS and its political project. Then, it presents the issue of case study research in relation to theory building as it has been treated in mainstream discussions. Specifically, I examine how generalizability has been reconceptualised as case studies have moved from a fringe methodology to one acknowledged by the mainstream. Further, I present Easton's work on linking case study research to Critical Realism. Then, I revisit the work of Spicer, Alvesson & Kärreman, showing how Critical Performativity might be operationalised in a methodology founded on case studies. Finally, I present a discussion and conclusion on the pitfalls of Critical Performativity and the use of case studies in CMS.

The contested project of performativity in CMS: Towards the concept of Critical Performativity

While criticism of management in the modern sense can be seen as early as the work of Adam Smith (1976), it is only in the 1990's that the common label of Critical Management Studies has been employed to unite the diverse range of critical approaches in management science (Burrell, 2009). However, since the early work in CMS, a certain political project has been crucial to it. Works by Alvesson & Willmott (1992a, 1992b, 1996) drew heavily on the notion of emancipation borrowed from the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School and post-Marxism. Mainstream management science was seen as in need of serious critical examination for its instrumentalist approaches and reduction of human agents to means to the end

of stakeholder value creation. Critical Theory, it was argued, might be used to 'prise open' management for study (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992b).

Under the heading of CMS and guided by the example from a range of management specialisms, business school academics were presented with the possibility of challenging the taken for granted naturalness of managerial practice and, in doing so, seeking to alleviate the alienation and suffering imposed by it. However, informed by the critique from poststructuralism and Foucaul of the emancipatory ideals of the Frankfurt School and Habermas' notion of the ideal speech situation, the project of CMS was re-cast in more modest and pragmatic terms. However, a notion of a common project in CMS and the intention of promoting social change for the better were retained.

Against this backdrop, the influential work of Fournier & Grey (2000) – although guided by a more poststructuralist understanding than that of Alvesson & Willmott – acknowledged that "to be engaged in critical management studies means, at the most basic level, to say that there is something wrong with management, as a practice and as a body of knowledge, and *that it should be changed*" (p. 16, italics added). As such, their description of CMS as having a non-performative intent should thus not be understood as relinquishing the ambition of changing the state of things. Rather, they argued, CMS should avoid the performative ambition of mainstream management research (which Adler, Forbes & Willmott [2007] describe as 'instrumentalist') of enhancing the effectiveness of managerial practice. Retaining the notion of a common project for CMS, they argue that this is "a political project... there is a commitment to freeing individual subjects from the power relations of within which they are inscribed" (Fournier & Grey, 2000, p. 19-20). The same notion is echoed in later work, claiming that "the project of CMS should be the transformation of management practice in tandem with the transformation of [business schools]" (Grey & Willmott, 2002, p. 417).

Positional polemics of performativity

Fournier & Grey (2000) describe the unsettled and related polemics within CMS over realism/relativism and engagement/disengagement with management practice, both of which are related to the performative project of CMS for social change. The realist approach, drawing frequently on Critical Realism and Critical Theory (Reed, 2009; Scherer, 2009), is more directly engaged and normatively explicit than the relativist approach which, inspired by the works of Foucault, postmodernism and poststructuralism, often employs more deconstructive analytical means and a less overtly performative intent (Jones, 2009). Given the two positions' very different perceptions of the defensibility of normative positions and the ethics of intervention and engagement, they have also developed very different strategies for bringing about the social change that CMS generally strives for – while some draw on radical poststructuralist perspectives to renounce the very notion of progress (Warwick Organizational Behaviour Staff, 2001), this is hardly the norm (Fleming, 2004). With the tradition of perpetual critique within CMS, the positions' mutual critique have been repeated continuously (Adler, Forbes & Willmott, 2007; Jaros 2001) and shall therefore only be glazed over below.

The realist approach to instigating social change has been a relatively direct one, employing terms like emancipation and utopias as exemplified in the works of Alvesson & Willmott (1992a, 1992b). Given the influence of both Labour Process Theory and Standpoint Theory on CMS, the desire of many CMS scholars to actively engage has been articulated by Parker: "I cannot, in good conscience, write without accepting the arrogant implication that organizations can be improved and that my words might help" (1995, p. 561). However, this approach has been critiqued for its alleged naïveté in attempting to speak on behalf of marginalized groups when itself altogether more privileged – poststructuralists point, for instance, to the attempt of white, first-world feminist academics to speak on behalf of all women, which has been challenged by black and third-world feminists (Adler, Forbes & Willmott, 2007). Further, the notion of the possibility of emancipation has been challenged in parallel with Foucault's critique of Habermas (Alvesson & Willmott, 2009), with some arguing that it might, in practice be hard to discern emancipation from new forms of domination (Adler, Forbes & Willmott, 2007). Finally, the perverse potential of making the oppressors better able to exercise power has been a long-standing unsolved problem (Nord & Jermier, 1992), given particularly that CMS is taught primarily in business schools, the students at which are likely to take up positions of power in organizations.

Given these reservations, relativist approaches to CMS employ quite different strategies inspired, often, by French traditions for postmodernism and poststructuralism (Jones, 2009) and in the Nietzchean understanding of the interwoven nature of power and knowledge rather than the Enlightenment ideals of progress (Adler, Forbes & Willmott, 2007). This approach has been suggested to offer a more dynamic basis or vantage point for critique (Antonacopoulou, 2010; Mitev, 2006), because it does not ground critique in normative ideals. Rather, it seeks to "make subjugation less opaque and facilitate resistance" to it (Adler, Forbes & Willmott, 2007, p. 141) without engaging directly or normatively in the resistance. This relativism, however, has led the approach to be strongly criticised for being unable to generate real critique (Thompson, 1993), undermining social scientific endeavour (Mingers, 2004), aestheticising critique (Fournier & Grey, 2000), overdoing negativity (Adler, Forbes & Willmott, 2007), being dandyistic (Gabriel, 2001), relinquishing notions of progress (Fleming, 2004) and, dramatically, fiddling while Rome burns (Callinicos, 1989).

Critical Performativity

It is in the light of this debate on approaches to the performative project of CMS, that Spicer, Alvesson & Kärreman (2009) suggest the notion of Critical Performativity. In seeking to "increase the performative capacities of CMS" in relation to its political project (Spicer, Alvesson & Kärreman, 2009, p. 545), they argue that CMS must become more pragmatic – if social change and improvement is the goal, the purist and disengaged approaches must be revised. CMS should instead come to appreciate the "contexts and constraints of management" (p. 545), engage with managers and mainstream theory and be grounded in a clear normativity of wanting to promote progressive change. For the authors, the notion of progressive change is a post-Marxist one inspired by Critical Theory as in early work by Alvesson & Willmott (1992a,

1992b, 1996), but more modest and 'tempered' in the means employed. In promoting this approach of 'tempered radicalism', they identify five elements of Critical Performativity: an affirmative stance, en ethic of care, a pragmatic orientation, attending to potentialities and a normative orientation.

An *affirmative stance* means, fundamentally, not denying the object of analysis, i.e. accepting that management is there and is likely to remain. As such, rather than claiming that management should disappear, scholars should engage with it, locate points with 'liberating potential' (Spicer, Alvesson & Kärreman, 2009, p. 546) and seek to *incrementally* make management better. They thus seek to move beyond the question of whether CMS should be for, against or anti- management or how to 'tear down the pillars' of it (Kelemen & Rumens, 2008), by acknowledging that management is a 'fact' of life, although not necessarily a natural one.

Likewise, taking up an *ethic of care* means relinquishing the oppositional or negative stance often associated with CMS (Adler, Forbes & Willmott, 2007) and engaging with the world, experience and 'folk theories' of the people studied. Further, it implies another, more open approach to mainstream theories than that currently dominant in CMS, where focus is on pushing and questioning what is there rather than blatantly dismissing it as wrong, thus calling for a more incremental approach to change. In describing their view on a caring approach, the authors also argue for paying attention to instances where management is, for instance, less oppressive or less unjust.

This attention is extended in the focus on *potentialities*. Rather than comparing the actualities (and perhaps dismal realities) of organizational and management practice to utopian ideals , CMS research could fruitfully attempt "to create a sense of what could be" (Spicer, Alvesson & Kärreman, 2009, p. 551) and study progressive and better than most practices. The progressive alternatives to mainstream practices might, because they are not too distant from current practices as to be impossible to achieve, inspire a sense of "hope and possibility" (Spicer, Alvesson & Kärreman, 2009, p. 551). To this end, the authors invoke, amongst others, examples of increased worker control over the workplace (as might be seen also in the work s of, e.g., Maaløe, 1998, 2006).

Pragmatism as a tactic for Critical Performativity relates to actually engaging in organizational practice and seeking to bring about change. For the researcher's immediate contact with the organization, this might mean seeking out silenced or marginal voices and attempting to bring about communicative action. By communicative action, the authors do not refer to ideal speech situations in the Habermasian sense, but rather to actual communicative practices that might be made more dialogical. For the authors, however, the point is primarily that it may be valuable to put aside the ideal and instead study pragmatically encouraging practices. This links with the need for a clear *normative* basis for CMS, where, the authors argue, "it [CMS] would be clear about what it [CMS] wants, or at least debate it" (Spicer, Alvesson & Kärreman, 2009, p. 553). Focusing on the concept of micro-emancipation and being explicit about this, CMS

research might seek out and support those progressive practices that make for increased autonomy, thus showing that "many alternatives to current systems of managerial domination and exploitation currently exist and *do indeed work*" (Spicer, Alvesson & Kärreman, 2009, p. 554, italics added). In this way, the authors promote an approach to CMS that overcomes the negativity that has often been associated with the field (Adler, Forbes & Willmott, 2007) which might also serve to make it more interesting and less depressing for practitioners and students – and perhaps mainstream researchers as well.

Taken together, the Critical Performativity that Spicer, Alvesson & Kärreman (2009) advocate sets up a more modest direction for CMS in attempting to intervene actively and dialogically in both practice and theory building to push both in a more progressive direction. In this way, the engagement with the mainstream becomes a much clearer intention, but one that must be guided by a clear normative orientation and encouraging, affirmative and, not least, patient approach. However, while the authors do provide valuable *tactics* for this, they hardly address its methodological implications. While their contestation that engagement with the mainstream involves CMS taking up a dialogical attitude is well-supported by tactics for direct engagement, influencing mainstream theory building would also mean being willing to speak a methodological and theoretical language, that is understandable, recognizable and palatable to mainstream researchers and the epistemic gate-keepers in the form of journal editors (Piekkari, Welch & Paavilainen, 200). Engagement involves not just the intention to engage but also a form that makes one's engagement welcome and suitable for alternative theory building.

Perspectives on generalizability from case studies: Rigor, generalization and Critical Realism

Case study research has, over recent years, come to be one of the most popular methodology in a range of fields (Easton, 2010a; Hammersley & Gomm, 2002; Hartley, 2004) and still more of what we know about the empirical world seems to be drawn from them (Gerring, 2004). Today, the methodology is widely accepted as having a greater potential for generating novel theory than many other methods (Eisenhardt, 1989) and is thoroughly embedded in the conventions and mainstream practices of all but the most positivistic business disciplines. That they are frequently within an implicitly posivistic understanding (Piekkari,Welch & Paavalainen, 2009) without acknowledging the problems associated with this naïve realism (Fairclough, 2005; Fleetwood, 2005; Mingers, 2004; Parker, 1995; Tsang & Kwan, 1999) does not seem to deter their use, which might reflect that positivism is taken for granted in most American, and to a lesser degree European, business school research (Alvesson, Bridgman & Willmott, 2009; Antonacopoulou, 2010; Fournier & Grey, 2000).

Historically, case study methodology and qualitative methods in general have not always been welcome in mainstream business research, and they have previously been criticized for lacking rigor and deemed unsuitable for anything but exploratory studies and hypothesis generation (Abercrombie, Hill & Turner, 1984; Hartley, 2004) seeing as they provided "… such a total absence of control as to be of almost no scientific value" (Campbell & Stanley, 1963, p. 38). Work by particularly Yin (2009) but also Eisenhardt (1989) has sought to remedy this, as it has provided a consensus definition of what case studies are, clear

procedures for sampling and theory building and a clarification of what type of generalization case studies might contribute. Further, they have shown how case studies are distinctly different from other qualitative methods with which they have been readily confused (Miles, 1979; Yin, 1981).

Thus, today the discussion on case studies in management research has moved beyond whether or not they are valuable. Rather, having established the methodology as rigorous in the mainstream sense, it concerns questions of what types of generalization they enable, how many cases are needed for generalizing and, to a lesser degree, their lack of philosophical underpinnings.

Generalizing from cases

A fundamental shift behind bringing case study methodology into the mainstream has been enabled by Yin's (2009) argument about the type of generalization made possible by case studies. Based on the definition that a case study is "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (Yin, 2009, p. 18), Yin distinguishes case studies from surveys and experiments. Surveys, on the contrary, do not investigate phenomena in depth, while experiments (frequently) are removed from a real life context. Surveys have a measure of control that case studies do not, which enables a positivist researcher to generalize to statistical propositions, which cannot be done from case studies. However, case studies can be used like experiments to make analytical generalizations to *theoretical* propositions.

In order to do so, Yin (2009) argues, case study research should employ several strategies. For one, it should triangulate between different sources of evidence and not merely employ one form of data collection. Yin mentions documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant-observation and physical artifacts as the six most common sources of evidence for case study research, but implies that there can be many more. As such, although Yin only quotes the work of Glaser & Strauss (1967) on grounded theory in relation to data analysis, he clearly echoes their approach in assuming, seemingly, that virtually everything might constitute a data source. If, Yin argues, several sources converge on a finding, that finding will be more robust. A second strategy involves using rival theories. Choosing not only one theory to guide the study, but at least one other, equally plausible, rival theory in the design phase of a case study is "essential, whether the ensuing case study's purpose is to develop or test theory".

Thirdly, employing multiple cases selected through theoretical sampling strengthens the claims to generalizability that a case study can make. By strategically selecting cases that are either similar or different along crucial dimensions, it becomes possible to make stronger claims to generalizability of a theory, because replication can be claimed. While generalization to total populations will never be possible, selecting cases that are either starkly typical of a general phenomenon (Yin mentions Lynd & Lynd [1929] as an example of this) or critically different from the norm (Yin refers to Gross, Bernstein & Giacquinta [1971])

might, when six to ten cases thus selected can be compared, enable *analytical generalization*. A similar point can be found in Eisenhardt's paper (1989), although she mentions the possibility of using only four to ten cases[1]. Fourthly, both Eisenhardt and Yin provide very clear and detailed methodological guidelines for conducting case studies, thus making the methodology much less opaque to mainstream research and much less idiosyncratic and uncontrollable.

Undoubtably, these developments have contributed greatly to the acceptance of case studies into the mainstream by acknowledging them as rigorous. As such, it has been possible to challenge notions like the one originally advanced by Stake (2002) that case studies may serve only purposes of 'naturalistic generalization'. His perspective claimed that case studies could not provide robust theoretical generalization, but only serve as 'vicarious experience' for researchers. As such, their role was reduced to little more than anecdotal evidence that could not be used for formal theory building, but only to give impressions of phenomena. Based on the recognition of the value of case studies, Barton-Cunningham (1997) has suggested three different classes of case studies allowing them to be used for purposes of both encouraging discovery of theory (if using few cases) and establishing proof (if using a large sample of cases), thus making studies relevant for almost all stages of theory building. A similar point is made by Gerring (2004), who argues for the complementarity of single and multiple case studies and explicitly mentions that the aim of any case study is to generalize across a larger set of units. Both of these papers illustrate the increasingly taken-for-granted acceptance of the methodology. Work by Flyvbjerg (2001) pushes the acceptance of the methodology somewhat further in arguing that case studies may serve to provide the 'practical wisdom' or *phronesis* that ought to be the goal of a successful social science, while other methods are disregarded.

The preoccupation of all the authors above, however, is that of correctly generalizing to describe general phenomena, reflecting implicitly the intention of Reichenbach (1963) that "the art of discovery is therefore the art of correct generalization" (p. 5). Schofield (2002) contends, however, that this is too limited a vision for qualitative methods in general and case study research in particular, because it reflects only the intention of generalizing "what is", i.e. what might be true of typical phenomena. Rather, she argues, case studies may provide generalizations also of two other types, namely "what may be" and "what could be". In doing so, she builds on the acceptance of case study research as a valid means of building accurate theory, but also advances the notion that it may be able to do something more.

The aim of generalizing "what is" basically reflects Yin's usage of typical cases in building theory that is likely to be applicable in most similar cases, thus mirroring basically the intention of generalizing *correctly*. The use of critical or extreme cases, in relation to this aim, is to clarify dimensions that are crucial to explaining the general state of things: if a theory proposes a certain conjuncture, studying extreme cases of

[1] In critique of both Yin and Eisenhardt, neither one describes how one might practically handle working in-depth with a full ten cases. Further, while the concept of theoretical sampling was originally developed by Glaser & Strauss (1967), it is only Eisenhardt who quotes them, while Yin again is implicit in drawing on them.

the dimension of that theory could provide insight into a general pattern. The primary interest here is to generate theory that is comparable across contexts.

Studying, on the other hand, cases of "what may be" means taking a more proactive role with research, using it to study phenomena that may be relevant in the future and using research to inform decisions about them. Schofield here cites her own work on using computers in schools, which was, at the time of her writing, a disputed issue with some arguing that computers were going to be more important than any previous invention (e.g. writing), while others believed their impact would be limited. In this sense, generalizing "what may be" means studying precisely a case (or several) of computer use that was, at the time, much more extensive than what was typical. It might thus mean studying a phenomenon that is generally perceived as new, in a context where it is perceived as normal. In this case, an extreme or critical case is chosen, not to be compared to a typical one but to stand as a case of a trend that may become general.

Finally, studying "what could be" relates to another use of extreme or critical cases. Like the cases of "what may be", cases of "what could be" relate to studying the untypical. However, the criteria for being different here is not so much an assumption that what is happening in the case will happen elsewhere in the future. Instead, the reason for studying the untypical cases is that they represent a condition that somehow makes them deviate from a more general class in a desired way. They represent, perhaps, a state that other, similar cases, might wish to achieve. In Schofield's own work on racial desegregation in American schools, for instance, she finds that a taboo on mentioning race to be conducive to reducing overt racial conflicts. As such, studying this type of case is interesting as it might be used to discover what happens so as to make a certain phenomenon that normatively declared to be attractive or progressive happen, she argues. In this way, she argues, cases can be and are highly suitable for, studying practices that are decidedly *not* common, but rather different in an attractive way. As such, it reflects another challenge to mainstream conceptions of the generalizability of case studies that moves beyond implicitly positivistic ambition of correct generalization to a more obviously normative approach.

Critical Realism

While the work done to increase the methodological rigor of case study research has served to mainstream the methodology, equivalent work on philosophical rigor has been largely absent (Easton, 2010a). As such, case study research follows the tendency of most mainstream research to not question its own underpinnings and to be unbothered by employing positivistic assumptions (Fournier & Grey, 2000; Grey & Willmott, 2002; Kelemen & Rumens, 2008). Indeed, although positivism is a frequently referred to as a 'naïve' position (Fairclough, 2005; Fleetwood, 2005; Mingers, 2004; Tsang & Kwan, 1999) and has been abandoned in even the hardest of sciences (Tsang & Kwan, 1999), it remains the implicit and unjustified assumption behind most case study research (Piekkari, Welch & Paavilainen, 2009) and the methodological theory guiding them, like Eisenhardt (1989) and Yin (2009).

Further, when it is made explicit that positivistic assumptions are drawn on in mainstream case study research, it is frequently used merely in reference to quantitative methods, juxtaposed to interpretive work and generally undebated (e.g. Cavaye, 1996; Darke, Shanks, & Broadbent, 1998; Dubé & Paré, 2003; Kaplan & Duchon, 1988). As such, when it is claimed that generalization is possible from case studies, there is no explicit grounds for it even if the methodology is rigorous on its own terms – the epistemological and ontological questions behind the question of whether generalization is *ever* possible *at all* are, rather, disregarded or at best glazed over.

It is only recently that work has been done to explicitly support case study research with Critical Realism (Easton, 2010a; Easton, 2010b), which seems surprising given both the apparent suitability of critical realist philosophy for case study research practice and the increasing attention that Critical Realism is receiving in many fields (Archer, Bhaskar, Collier, Lawson & Norrie, 1998; Easton, 2010a). Given that Critical Realism claims to provide an alternative to postmodernist perspectives that, although also problematic, for a time viewed as the only viable substitute for positivism (Fairclough, 2005), the position presents the researcher with a way to navigate between the equally disputed poles of objectivism and relativism (Parker, 1995). It is interesting to note, in that regard, how Critical Realism was developed by Bhaskar (1978, 1979, 1986) originally to be an alternative to positivism, but has later come to be an alternative to postmodernism (Alvesson & Skjöldberg, 2009).

It is, however, Sayer's account of Critical Realism (1992, 2000) that Easton draws on in bringing the perspective to bear on case study research (2010a, 2010b). While the term Critical Realism does cover a very wide variety of realist perspectives (perhaps due to the somewhat opaque form of Bhaskar's writings), Sayer and his version have been pointed to as detailed, comprehensive and of key importance, which makes Eastons reliance on it understandable. Further, its clarity makes it worth quoting at some length what it describes as the eight key assumptions of Critical Research:

1. "The world exists independently of our knowledge of it.
2. Our knowledge of the world is fallible and theory-laden. Concepts of truth and falsity fail to provide a coherent view of therelationship between knowledge and its object. Nevertheless knowledge is not immune to empirical check and its effectiveness in informing and explaining successful material practice is not mere accident.
3. Knowledge develops neither wholly continuously, as the steady accumulation of facts within a stable conceptual framework, nor discontinuously, through simultaneous and universal changes in concepts.
4. There is necessity in the world; objects – whether natural or social – necessarily have particular powers or ways of acting and particular susceptibilities.
5. The world is differentiated and stratified, consisting not only of events, but objects, including structures, which have powers and liabilities capable of generating events. These structures may be present even where, as in the social world and much of the natural world, they do not generate regular patterns of

events.
6. Social phenomena such as actions, texts and institutions are concept dependent. We not only have to explain their production and material effects but to understand, read or interpret what they mean. Although they have to be interpreted by starting from the researcher's own frames of meaning, by and large they exist regardless of researchers' interpretation of them. A qualified version of 1 therefore applies to the social world. In view of 4–6, the methods of social science and natural science have both differences and similarities.
7. Science or the production of any kind of knowledge is a social practice. For better or worse (not just worse) the conditions and social relations of the production of knowledge influence its content. Knowledge is also largely—though not exclusively—linguistic, and the nature of language and the way we communicate are not incidental to what is known and communicated. Awareness of these relationships is vital in evaluating knowledge.
8. Social science must be critical of its object. In order to be able to explain and understand social phenomena we have to evaluate them critically" (Sayer, 1992, p.5).

The "both/and" nature of Critical Realism is highly apparent here, mirroring the way that the position navigates between the fundamental belief in a real world that can "push back" and the epistemological consequences of postmodernism in what might be called a 'non-tantrumous' way (inspired by Craib, 1992): just because social constructionism makes it clear that we cannot know everything all the time, we can still (at least in a performative way) know something some of the time and the conventions of science make it likely that we will continue to learn more in the future.

Although Easton argues that Critial Realism is highly compatible with case study research, he also points to particular attentions that it would require to conduct decidedly critical realist case studies. First, he proposes that Critical Realism would require case studies to answer questions on the form of "What caused the events associated with the phenomenon to occur" (Easton, 2010a, p. 123). As such, focus lies on *events* (defined as "the external and visible behaviours of people, systems and things as they occur, or as they have happened" [Easton, 2010a, p. 120]) and the *mechanisms* (defined as "ways in which structured entities by means of their powers and liabilities act and cause particular events" [Easton, 2010a, p. 122]) that cause them. This interplay between visible behaviors and invisibly influential mechanisms (also referred to as 'processes' or 'structures') link to both the notion of a *stratified ontology* and the concept of *retroduction*.

The stratified ontology of Critical Realism is an attempt to distinguish levels within reality so as to handle the insight that "the world is socially constructed but not entirely so" (Easton, 2010a, p. 120). As such, there exists three levels of existence, namely the *real*, the *actual* and the *empirical*. The actual is the level of reality at which events occur and what is (in principle) visible. The empirical is that part of the actual which is experienced or observed through the fallible faculties of senses and interpretation. As such, the empirical is the part of the actual, which is recorded. The real is that which lies behind and *causes* the actual through

generative mechanisms and structures and is not visible or observable in itself but through its effects. Case studies, then, should explore the empirical domain through diverse data sources in order to understand the actual and uncover, ultimately, the mechanisms at work in the domain of the real.

Retroduction is the process of this discovery and is the "key epistemological process" (Easton, 2010a, p. 124) of Critical Realism. It refers to the process of 'moving backward' from an observed event and asking ""What must be true in order to make this event possible?" (Easton, 2010a, p. 123). It thus moves beyond merely identifying which events co-exist and penetrate to a deeper level of reality by uncovering what real structures or mechanisms lead to an event. Again, the possibility offered by case study research for a "cut and come again" (Easton, 2010a, p. 124) data collection and multi-source data collection supports the attempts to penetrate to deeper levels of explanation until epistemological closure is obtained.

This focus on uncovering those mechanisms which best explain a given event, relates to a second reason why Critical Realism is a fitting approach to case studies, namely the use of rival theories. As Critical Realism focuses on discovering the real mechanisms with the greatest explanatory power, "there should always be competing explanations since different interpretations of the data are necessary to ensure that the "best" current interpretation is made" (Easton, 2010a, p. 122), which clearly matches Yin's (2009) argument that rival theories should always be included in the theoretical models developed in the design phase of case study research. Further, the in-depth nature of case studies makes it possible to explore if and how several influential mechanisms are at work to produce an outcome. Given the ease of making causal misattributions, Easton points out how it is pragmatically desirable that "a number of different causal explanations are put forward and researched" (Easton, 2010a, p. 124) and how case studies make this achievable.

Critical Realism's focus both on explanation through causal mechanism and on the fallibility of knowledge, however, also defines a particular direction for what kind of generalization might be made from case studies. First, "the most fundamental aim of critical realism is causal explanation" (Easton, 2010a, p. 121). As such, case studies, in order to be called critical realist case studies and be philosophically rigorous, should be aimed at discovering causal mechanisms in the individual case (or group of cases) that might also apply – given *invariance* – in other cases. This concept of invariance again seeks to balance objectivism and relativism in a non-tantrumous way: although every event can be said to be unique, not being unique does not mean being completely unlike everything else. Events, thus, can be said to be both *trivially* and *substantially* unique (Easton, 2010a, p. 127). For critical realist case studies this means that the goal of inquiry is uncovering mechanisms that might apply in other cases, provided they are not substantially unique. Whether a case is substantially unique, however, is never entirely definable, which introduces an element of uncertainty to the generalizations that might be made. This links to the second reservation that Critical Realism requires of case study research.

This reservation concerns the nature of the generalizations that might be made. While Critical Realism is more optimistic than postmodernist approaches when it comes to generalization, it is not naïvely optimistic. Easton thus makes it clear that there can only ever be provisional judgments about what reality is like, meaning that although explanations of which mechanisms caused events can be made, these will always be "semi-regularities" (to borrow a term from Alvesson & Skjöldberg, 2009). As we "will always be surmising about the nature of the real" (Easton, 2010a, p. 128), epistemological closure will always be flawed and temporary and, at best, a form of quasi-closure instead of the pervasive closure assumed to be possible by positivism (Downward, Finch & Ramsay, 2002).

Revisiting Critical Performativity: The potential of critical realist case studies of "what could be"

Above, I have outlined how case study methodology has developed from a fringe approach to the business research mainstream and, from there, been developed further within mainstream research, with work being done both to remedy the all too frequent implicit positivism of mainstream use of the method and to stake out a bolder ambition of the generalizability of it. In light of a concurrent development within CMS that pays greater attention to the political project within the field and calls for a more direct and impact seeking engagement with the mainstream (as exemplified by the concept of Critical Performavity), these developments suggests that the mainstream methodology of case studies might be pressed into a more critical and progressive service.

The notion that critical realist case studies of "what could be" might be an appropriate way of working practically with and expanding upon the tactics of Critical Performativity is hardly far-fetched. While CMS might have been prone to rejecting the mainstream use of case studies for its lack of philosophical reflexivity, the work of Easton is beginning to underpin the methodology with a recognized and rigorous philosophy of science that is also deeply embedded within CMS (Reed, 2009). Further, Easton's work makes explicit mention of the emancipatory axiology of Critical Realism and although this is not explored in further detail, it does match very well the intentions of post-Marxist CMS inspired by Critical Theory.

Further, although Schofield's claim that case studies may be used to generalize "what could be" (2002) might resonate uncomfortably with CMS academics as strikingly similar to mainstream business school work on picking the winners (e.g. Peters & Waterman, 1982) or blue-printing solutions (e.g. Hammer & Champy, 1993) typical of business school academics, it might be a means by which "CMS will be able to show that many alternatives to current systems of managerial domination and exploitation *currently* exist and *do* indeed work" (Spicer, Alvesson & Kärreman, 2009, p. 554, italics added). "Attempting to create a sense of what could be" (Spicer, Alvesson & Kärreman, 2009, p. 551) might be a worthy ambition of a CMS not content only with critiquing, but while that sense could be created in many ways, studying cases of "what could be" might prove to impact the mainstream *more* than engaging with distant utopias (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992b). As such, this approach to cases could be a way of engaging with potentialities that is easier for the mainstream to accept and, ultimately, incorporate in its theory building.

Taken together, the methodological approach of critical realist case studies of "what could be" proposes that case studies be employed to seek out and study practices judged to be progressive according to explicit normative criteria. In doing so, it might involve identifying events deemed to constitute progressive practices and then examining what underlying mechanisms make those events and practices possible and, for instance, which combinations of mechanisms are essential and (through theoretical sampling of other cases) which mechanisms obstruct them. In this regard, the multi-source data collection in case studies offers an interesting and critical means of eliciting these mechanisms that both resonates with the openness of CMS to methodological innovation and with the mainstream demand for recognizability and rigor. Basing case studies on Critical Realism might, however, also mean accepting that "what could be" could only potentially be in other contexts if neither the case studied or the other context are substantially unique, which is arguably a far cry removed from the notion that some utopian vision *ought* to be applicable everywhere. It would, nonetheless, be a way for CMS scholars to begin to say "yes" to the practices they do want instead of only saying "no" to all the things they don't want.

Taking up this form of case study research might thus be performative in advancing the political project of CMS in a range of ways that go beyond what Spicer, Alvesson & Kärreman (2009) describe in relation to Critical Performativity. This relates to engaging with mainstream management theory, practice and business school teaching.

In relation to management theory, employing case studies thus described implies incrementally pushing towards more progressive conceptions of management that present themselves as potentialities. Working on cases of progressive practices and, specifically, relating them to mainstream management theory (instead of focusing on theories that are specifically critical) might provide counterpictures to challenge some of the taken-for-granted assumptions behind management theory, e.g. those concerning the roles and attributes of managers and workers. Further, providing constructive alternatives rather than critique and deconstructions might make the theoretical contributions of CMS more welcome in the mainstream.

In addition to the possibilities presented by Spicer, Alvesson & Kärreman (2009) for engaging practice, the described methodology enables a strong way of supporting progressive practices and lending them legitimacy: by actively seeking out practices for their progressiveness and unique sends a strong affirmative message to those organizations defying isomorphic pressures and working in non-conventional or experimental ways to improve conditions. Further, drawing on cases of progressive practices might also be a means of engaging other practitioners than managers. Case studies of "what could be" might prove more vivid and inspiring to not just employees but also social movements, unions or political actors and allow for a more constructive resistance to the naturalness and hegemony of management (Spicer & Böhm, 2007).

Finally, case study research of the form here presented might contribute to 'making the business school more critical' (Antonacopoulou, 2010) in a way that is more motivating and attractive to the students and, as such, future managers. By dealing "a blow to received models of our discipline" (Grey, 2004, p. 180) through not only negatively tuned critique but also affirmative presentation of alternatives, management school students can be invited to critically reconsider their own practices vis-à-vis non-traditional models. The not-too-distant nature of cases of progressive practice might spark precisely such creative reflection and motivation better than apparent dead-end deconstructions of some CMS. The current attraction of business school students to innovative practices and models of how to improve organizations (e.g. Hammer & Champy, 1993; Peters & Waterman, 1982) could be an opportunity for sparking interest in CMS through cases of "what could be".

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